



Supporting independent play skills



In an age where children are engaging in more screen time and parents are busier than ever, we have developed a few tips on ways you can support your child's independent play skills.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that children aged between 8 - 10 years spend an average of 6 hours per day in front of the screen. These statistics only increase as children get older, with children aged 11 - 14 years spend an average of nine hours per day in front of a screen.

As caregivers, it can be difficult getting through daily tasks while having to entertain your children at the same time. Often it can be easier to give them an iPad with an educational game or put on their favourite movie.

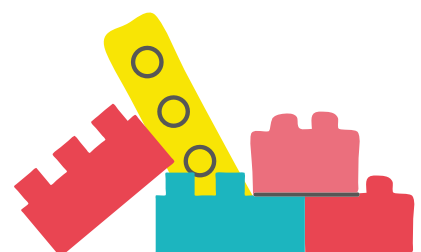
While having some screen time is not bad, it is also important to understand the benefits of play on overall development. However, some children have increased difficulty playing independently and require more support, which can be difficult when you are trying to get through that never ending 'to-do' list. That is why we have put together a few strategies to reduce passive screen time and increase independent play skills:

1. Start early:

Independent play skills begin in infancy. Babies learn to entertain themselves by chewing on their hands or toys, shaking a rattle, looking at a mobile, batting at toys on a baby gym, kicking their legs, cooing, blowing raspberries etc. This is not to say that you should not interact with your baby, but allowing them to entertain themselves is a good thing.

2. Allow your child to get bored:

Boredom can often result in creativity. Unstructured free time is necessary for boredom to set in. As caregivers, we often try to ensure every minute of the day has some sort of activity planned. Try scheduling in 30 minutes of daily free play (no screens during this time...for children or adults). You could start with even less time than this and increase the duration over time, as your child develops the ability to play independently. Also remember that if your child sees you on your phone or device a lot, they will likely mimic these behaviours.



3. Provide an environment that fosters play:

Reduce distractions during playtime by 1) turning off the TV, 2) keeping digital devices (phones and tablets) out of sight, and 3) offering fewer toy choices to reduce clutter and overwhelm. This does not mean you should get rid of all your toys; rather, try keeping them in one room of the house and bring two or three into the room where the child is playing or you can try rotating toys. This also helps to make packing up more manageable.

4. Limit battery-operated toys that passively entertain the child:

Battery operated toys are great, however they don't always encourage learning through discovery and exploration. Sometimes the simpler the toy, the better, as they encourage the child to be creative and use their imagination.

5. Set up the toy and model how to play with it:

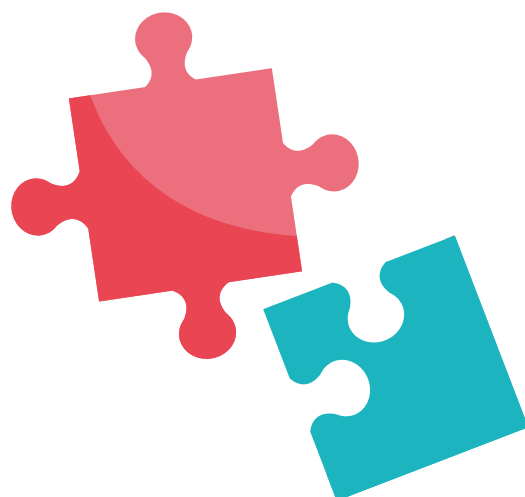
Some children need to be shown how to play with their toys. You may need to sit with your child to start with and model how to play with the toys. As the child begins playing, the adult can gradually step away from the play area and encourage them to play independently.

6. Be interested in the child's play:

Make occasional comments, so your child knows you are present and engaged. Independent play does not mean you have to leave the child alone and go into another room of the house. Independent play for a young child typically happens while the adult is doing something (a chore or relaxing) nearby.

7. Avoid unnecessary interruptions:

If the child is focused, be respectful of the play process, and observe without being a distraction. Learning does not only occur during adult-directed play.



8. Know the child's interests:

Make playtime relevant by knowing what motivates and interests your child. There is no point setting up an activity that your child is unlikely to engage in.

9. Keep expectations reasonable:

Start with 2-3 minutes of independent play, and then build from there. Make the expectations clear (i.e. “You play with your blocks for 3 minutes while I finish my coffee, then I will come play with you.”). The use of timers or other visual cues can help older children understand time expectations.

10. Establish family screen time rules:

It is important that children don't have unlimited access to screens. When screen time is requested, it is okay to say 'no' and offer other options. Examples of screen time rules include: 1) no screens during mealtime, 2) no screens in the toy room, 3) you may have 30 minutes of screen time after nap, 4) we shut the screen off when your show is over. Remember to always set the example.

